Perspective

Song of the Sirens

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There are few who, at one time or another, have not read the *Odyssey* and followed the travels and various adventures of Odysseus (Ulysses). It will be recalled that among his narrow escapes, Ulysses passed the island of the Sirens, located near the west coast of Italy. If it were not for his quick thinking (he plugged his crew's ears and tied himself to the ship's mast), the songs of the island inhabitants would have lured Ulysses and his ships to an untimely (and permanent) stop at the island.

Modern-day Ulysses (commonly referred to as consumers) are constantly lured by Sirens, whose call issues forth from pages of advertising. Recently added to these various “calls” are advertisements for medical computer systems directed toward the potential “small system” physician user. As ear plugs, rope, and masts are sometimes unavailable, there is virtue in examining these islands of song to aid in distinguishing the rocky shoals from the safe harbors.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

A prevailing misconception of computer system advertising is that it is intended to sell a product. The proper purpose of this advertising, however, is to lure potential purchasers into revealing themselves to the sales representative. The actual sales process is a post-consumer-identification activity.

The advertisement serves the small computer system vendor in several ways. Depending upon the publication selected, the cost per impression (individuals seeing the ad) is quite modest. Second, sales representatives' time can be directed to customers whose response to the ad indicates more than casual interest and thus increases the probability of a sale. Third, the message of the ad can easily be altered to conform to various responses (or lack thereof). This last consideration can be turned to the physician consumer's advantage as it is the content of the message that often reveals the true nature of the computer system being promoted.

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THE HEALTH-COMP 8000

Consider the Health-Comp 8000, a mythical medical computing system. There are a variety of messages that might be constructed for the physician public in order to identify potential purchasers of the Health-Comp. Each message has an inference or an implication. It is the implication that usually serves to motivate the customer to contact the salesman. Below are several possible "messages" for the Health-Comp 8000 and various attendant implications and realities.

_The Health-Comp 8000—Tomorrow’s system for today’s physician._

**Implication.** The physician can “get the jump” on technological innovation and owes it to his or her patients to do so.

**Reality.** Probably has basic applications, but will cost more due to “tomorrow’s” technology. The appeal is to one-upmanship rather than to common sense.

_The Health-Comp 800—Can be yours for as little as $200 per month._

**Implication.** A very inexpensive way to computerize the office, and should appeal to anyone who is cost-conscious. (Isn’t everyone?)

**Reality.** Not only does the Health-Comp cost little, at $200 per month it does little. This is the classic dealer option approach, which seeks to delude the customer into believing his $200 per month system with $800 per month of options is a bargain. Very seldom are there “bargains” in medical computing. One receives what one pays for.

_The Health-Comp 8000—Tailored to the needs of the physician._

**Implication.** A very special system of direct value to medicine.

**Reality.** Little if any software exists. If the cost of the hardware is frightening, wait until the bill for the programming arrives.

_The Health-Comp 8000—A complete system including receivables, payables, scheduling, drug/drug interaction, drug/lab interaction, patient histories, diagnostic modeling, etc., etc., etc._

**Implication.** This system has everything a physician could possibly want.

**Reality.** The system probably includes a great deal the physician does not want, but will pay for anyway.

_The Health-Comp 8000—Order today for 1981 delivery._

**Implication.** This system will be in such demand that not ordering now means possibly never having one.

**Reality.** This is the classic “bait and switch.” Likely as not, the customer will order a Health-Comp 1 in 1979. (In 1981, of course, it will be the Health-Comp 9000 for delivery in 1983.)

And finally . . .

_The Health-Comp 8000—We provide the hardware, you provide the software . . . as only you can._

**Implication.** The highest quality system is one to which the specific medical knowledge of the user physician must be applied.

**Reality.** Welcome to the world of computer programming. Add 20 hours per week to the existing 60 hours. As an alternative, order the Health-Comp 8000 for 1981. It may very well be ready before you are.